



How Cruise Lines Enhance Festive Family Traditions for Guests Celebrating the Holidays at Sea

By Erica Silverstein

Travelers are discovering the no-hassle joys of cruising during holiday periods.

Holiday cruises appeal to a wide swath of the traveling public: Couples who don't want the pressure of hosting, families looking to spend time together, solo travelers who don't want to be alone on the holidays, and experience-chasers looking for epic celebrations.

Christmas and New Year's sailings to warm climates are particularly popular, and some cruise line members of the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) have expanded themed holiday sailings to include Halloween and Thanksgiving.

The cruise lines pull out all the stops to make sure key traditions are not only highlighted but enhanced, often with clergy onboard for those who observe, holiday food and special activities.

Why take a holiday cruise?

The obvious reason to cruise over the holidays is to focus on fun and family time without worrying about logistics. Seasonal celebrations become amazing vacations.

No one needs to cook, clean, or squeeze too many guests into too few bedrooms. Host families don't have to entertain visitors of all ages because ships have daily activities to satisfy the entire clan.

Cruise ships are designed to host groups, with accommodations to suit different budgets, plus connecting rooms, and cabins that can sleep four (sometimes more). Onboard dining teams are adept at handling special diets and can offer holiday feasts with options for every palate.

"You're not just taking a vacation — you're elevating a holiday tradition," says Lainey Melnick, a travel advisor with CLIA Premier Agency Member Dream Vacations. "In my family's case, holiday cruises have become some of our most talked-about memories — and that's ultimately what clients are investing in."

For families overwhelmed with stuff, cruise vacations themselves make great presents, says Susie Flores, a travel advisor with CLIA Premier Agency Member Cruise Planners. "I've had many families tell me that they give their kids a few gifts, but keep the larger present as the vacation," Flores says.

Religious services

Cruise lines support guests who want to observe religious holidays with clergy on board most ships for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services. When spring cruises overlap with Passover and Easter, cruise lines may add clergy for Easter services and Passover seders.

Travel advisor Melnick says cruise lines are more accommodating of religious requirements than many travelers realize, making guests feel comfortable about cruise travel that overlaps with important holidays.

Festive celebrations on board

For the holidays, cruise lines go all in with holiday decorations, special menus, and themed events.

Onboard Thanksgiving dinners feature turkey, pumpkin pie, and other favorites. Sports bars show Thanksgiving football games. Hanukkah cruises host nightly electric candle lighting ceremonies and serve donuts and latkes, following the tradition of eating fried foods.

Both river- and ocean-going ships decorate their decks for Christmas with trees, lights, garlands, and gingerbread displays. Guests can enjoy the season with Santa visits, atrium caroling, holiday storytime, and seasonal craft-making. Carnival Cruise Line hosts an ugly sweater competition, and the Grinch will stalk the decks, thanks to the line's partnership with Dr. Seuss.

Cruise lines get in the Halloween spirit with costume parties and treats for kids. Disney Cruise Line celebrates throughout September and October with Halloween trees, Jack-o-lanterns, and spooky-ish movies shown on board. Mickey Mouse and friends sport Halloween costumes while kids trick or treat, and adults can enjoy themed beverages.

Cruise lines mark other holidays, as well. Holland America Line, Cunard, and American Cruise Line position ships to see July 4 fireworks in U.S. ports and celebrate with onboard picnics, red-white-and-blue treats, and themed games and crafts. Princess Cruises often hosts vow renewals on Valentine's Day.

Anyone looking for a memorable night out on New Year's Eve will find it on a cruise ship with midnight countdowns on the pool deck or in the atrium, complete with sparkling wine.

"We have been offering a group cruise over New Year's Eve for the past four years to start the new year off with a big celebration," says Karen Quinn-Panzer, MCC, owner of Dream Vacations Quinn Panzer in Naples, Fla. "Many ships have parties all over the ship," she adds. "Why not let the captain do the driving!"

© 2026 Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA). All rights reserved.

This content may be shared or republished with clear attribution to Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA). Content must remain intact and may not be altered, edited, or excerpted in any way that changes its meaning or context. For additional permissions, media inquiries, or additional information, please email krobinson@cruising.org.